

How many times have you said or heard that in conversations everything is admissible except religion and politics? For some reason these two topics polarize people. You can feel the tension in a room build when either topic is brought up. We stop listening, we get defensive and often close our minds. We do not want our beliefs challenged. We set our feet in cement and vow not to change. We may even live in a more polarized nation/world/church than ever before in history.

I thought about this in relation to the words of Deuteronomy and the charge to the people to share their faith. They are to tell the stories, recite the law and statutes Moses has given them to their children and their children's children. The words of God are to be written on their hearts, on their doorposts and even on their clothing. They are in constant need of being reminded who they are and who their God is.

They have been given the guidelines for becoming a people. They have been given directions designed to form them into the people of God. These are given to assist them in becoming a community. They should not be viewed as a list of laws and regulations, restrictions put on them and their lifestyle but rather as guidelines for community living. They have been called by God to be the people of God. They have been called to be people different from those around them – these guidelines are what it means to be called the people of God.

I remember directing summer camps in Maine. We had a camp coordinator who felt it was her job to share the rules and regulations of the camp. She was the first person on the agenda after the parents had left and the campers had settled in. She delighted in listing all the “don'ts” and then concluded with her one “do” – have fun! How can you have fun if you have to obey so many rules? We finally decided to put a more positive spin on the camp community building and get rid of most of the don'ts. She quit. God does work in mysterious ways!

Now some people rebel against guidelines. They may complain that they are restrictive, etc. However, all of us are used to living and working with guidelines. None of us who work, works in a place that does not have guidelines we have to follow. There are specific rules and regulations we have to follow if we want to keep working. We learn them. They become a part of who we are at work, etc. We know that they help keep the organization functioning. They keep us as a community.

These guidelines in Deuteronomy are to be taught to the children and the children's children. They are to tell the story. These need to be passed along to future generations – the story must be told. They are to become a part of who the people of Israel are. So much a part of who they are that they no longer have to think about them. This is what it means to be in community with God.

Several people have said to me lately, “this is not in your job description.” Now my response is “yes and no.” No, it is not spelled out in my job description, if I have one. But if I am a part of the community and there are things needing to get done then why should I not contribute? That is one reason why I know that the

theater seats in the sanctuary of FBC of Los Angeles vary in size. There are some 15", some 16", some 18" and some 22" wide. And there is no rhyme or reason why or where they are placed! Now I found this out because we needed to repair one or two and get the sanctuary ready for an upcoming event. Now it was not in my "job description" to help, but I was there, a job needed to get done, etc. To be a part of a community is to be a part of the community.

The reason to keep the law and statutes commanded by God is not because Moses said to but because these are what help form them into a community. Becoming and being a part of a community means to take seriously what it means to be the people of God. Thus, these guidelines need to be shared.

Wednesday evening I met briefly with the choir and they were talking about a song that you used to do as a congregation. You have not done it since I have been here and so I had no idea what they were talking about. I do now. Why? Because they shared the story with me. Had they not shared I would not have known. We often feel that everyone knows our stories, but they don't. It is important that we share our stories.

This raises a question: Is the world in danger of losing the message of Christ? The Barna study group in their weekly update last week reported on a study done in the United States on the Bible and who was and who was not reading it. They discovered that the older you are the more apt you are to read the Bible. The younger generation is not into Bible reading. Now we have friends in Scotland who also read Barna's study and commented on it in their blog. They asked if young people ever read what they did not have to read? They also noted that in the United Kingdom many daily devotionals are going out of business or are resorting to only being on line. People are not reading them any more. They asked if we need to update how we tell the story? What happens when no one knows the stories?

The year we were on home assignment with International Ministries saw us having many Sundays to be on our own. We were able to visit around. One congregation met in a small theater in Los Angeles. We were encouraged to go to this "experimental" worship. It was fine. I remember, not the message, but a story the pastor told. Barry had visited a major bookstore the past week (like Barnes and Noble or Borders). He had noticed as he entered the store two displays (it was close to Holy Week), one was for Passover and the other for Easter. He said the Passover display featured the story of Passover for all age groups. He was impressed. Then he went over to the Easter display and found stories of bunnies, duckies and colored eggs. There was nothing about Christ and the Cross.

Douglas Copeland in one of his books writes that the world will end when we stop telling our stories. If the church ends, it is not because of persecution, etc. It is because we have stopped telling our stories.

Hebrews is reminding us of the story we have to tell. Christ came, walked among us, lived with us. He ate and drank in our midst. He knew the pain of loss and suffering. Yet in all of this he remained without sin. And then, on one day he took the burden of our guilt on the cross: He who was without sin died for those with sin. Using the concept of the Old Testament sacrificial system the writer of Hebrews says that Christ offered once and for all the final sacrifice needed for our redemption. As we stated last week, the story does not change. However, we may need to change how we tell the story.

However, in order to tell the story we have to have heard the story. I recall reading to our grandsons when they were younger. They had specific stories that needed to be read to them every night. Now, they had heard these stories so often that they knew when you missed or changed a word. How will we know the story has been changed if we have never heard the story? Who will tell the story when no one knows the story?

Tony Campolo writing in 1995 writes about the decline in membership in mainline congregations in the late 1950's and 60's. He writes that congregations became so caught up in the social gospel that they forgot the rest of the story. *"The mainline churches that were being deserted had been so into social issues that they had forgotten that there is another side to religion. They had forgotten that people need spiritual ecstasy, a sense of communion with God, a feeling of being caught up in the hands of One who could sustain them in times of trouble and confusion."* Or, they had stopped telling the stories of Jesus and his love.

The writer of Deuteronomy knew that when we fail to tell the stories they will cease to be a part of who we are. Thus, it is important that we learn the stories and that we tell and retell the stories. They help us build community and as they become a part of who we are we not only tell the stories, but we live the stories.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989

Campolo, Tony, Can Mainline Denominations Make A Comeback, Judson Press, VF, PA, 1995